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ISSUE 281



OUT OF DARKNESS

Heavy with death, haunted by mental illness – but always laced with hope – **Marilyn Manson's** new record is a fitting soundtrack to the end of days. The infamous frontman and his collaborator on the album **Shooter Jennings** talk about the life and crimes behind *We Are Chaos*.

Words: **Henry Yates** Photos: **Travis Shinn**

As a sometime music writer, Marilyn Manson knows the value of mythology. It's past midnight in California when he phones from his Los Angeles home – a detail that chimes nicely with our perception of shock-rock's crown prince as a thing that goes bump in the night. He shrugs off the suggestion that he should be in bed, not doing press. "I'm nocturnal," he says. "I have been completely at a loss for time, because of the circumstances we're in. And my house has dark window shades, so when I wake up I never know if it's day or night."

As we will discover, Manson has found lockdown "mentally devastating", and despite a three-decade career built on all things macabre he sees little black humour in the mounting death toll from Covid-19. "No. People getting sick and dying, in an uncontrollable fashion they can't contain, that's not in any way something I think should be taken lightly. We're battling a plague that is not of our time. We've never experienced something this awful. I understand what you're saying, in the Antichrist sense of it. But my dream of an apocalypse would be much more interesting and colourful."

In these dark times, the light beneath Manson's blackout curtain is his latest, and certainly most interesting album. Written and produced with alt-country star and fellow slasher-flick connoisseur Shooter Jennings, *We Are Chaos* is a Manson record that shocks not so much with its bogeyman bric-a-brac as with its breadth of vision.

"We're both opinionated," Jennings tells me, a week later. "We love a lot of music, and we were

Beautiful People leaving its aftertaste on *Perfume*. Elsewhere the gloomy synths of *Don't Chase The Dead*, *Half-Way & One Step Forward* and *Keep My Head Together* represent what Jennings calls "a new goth", touched by Bauhaus, The Cure and Joy Division, while *Paint Me With Your Love* is a sweet-tooth ballad with one eye on country radio, and the title track's melancholy jangle sails close to The Beatles' *Across The Universe*.

"I once said in an interview that I am chaos incarnate," Manson reflects. "But this song is called *We Are Chaos*, which makes it more of an anthem. You include the word 'we', and suddenly it's everyone singing along. So I think it's my version of *We Are The World*," he says with a chuckle.

Throughout, Jennings's atmospheric production puts Manson under your skin. The pair's collaboration is long and knotty – an aborted song for the *Sons Of Anarchy* TV show, a cover of Bowie's *Cat People* in 2016 – but in a city known for fakery their friendship has lasted. "Out here in LA, Manson is my best friend," says the 41-year-old. "We get together, watch scary movies. I've always had a fascination with the dark side of things. When I was a little kid my dad [outlaw country legend

"We're battling a plague... My dream of an apocalypse would be much more interesting and colourful."

Marilyn Manson

both showing things to each other. There was a lot to learn from him. Like really deep-cut Roxy Music, or Love And Rockets and Fields Of The Nephilim. Bands I never knew about that I became obsessed with afterwards. Bowie is where we come together. And Bowie was always dark, y'know?"

At times on the album the old Manson dies hard, with the glam-jackboot stomp of early hit *The*





Shooter Jennings: not your cowboy hat-wearing country guy.

Fans of the darker side of things: Jennings and Manson in January 2020.

Waylon Jennings] used to wake me up in the middle of the night and say: 'There's a scary movie on TV. Wanna come watch?' I'd go down, get scared to death, go to bed crying. But then, I just wanted to watch more. Me and Manson just watched *The Holy Mountain* together, one of the darkest movies ever."

Jennings bristles a little, though, at the suggestion that as part of the country crowd he's an odd choice as the album's producer.

"No, because you're looking at it from the outside," he offers. "I don't walk around in a cowboy hat. We're fuckin' friends, y'know? Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails were two of the most influential bands in my life when I was young. I had to have a girlfriend buy me [Manson's '94 record] *Portrait Of An American Family* because of all the news hype. So I knew in my heart that I could knock this record out of the park. I knew that I was

scared of how it was gonna happen. Because I didn't know. It was like climbing a mountain in the dark."

The admiration is mutual. "I used to walk out on stage to *Fuck You (I'm Famous)*, not knowing Shooter yet, just loving the song," Manson says. "All Of This Could Have Been Yours, off his *Black Ribbons* album, was the first song on my dressing room playlist."

Pre-covid, the pair tossed ideas for *We Are Chaos* back and forth from their respective tour buses, recording when possible at each other's home studios. Manson believes the first track they

worked on was *Half-Way & One Step Forward*. Jennings thinks it might have been the standout nu-goth *Don't Chase The Dead*. "I played bass and Manson was just messing around, doing this crazy 'noise' guitar on my Gibson SG. We really like the

at Disney Hall in LA," Manson recalls. "That night, as we left, I convinced him to steal a chair from some banquet room. We went home to his studio, and I sat in this Disney chair and sang the final vocals for *We Are Chaos*. That chair brought the Disney magic into my ass and through the microphone. So you can thank Mickey Mouse for that song. But then next morning Shooter was awoken by the police..."

Jennings: "They had security camera footage of us taking it, and said: 'If you bring the chair back we won't press charges.'"

If the pair are clear about the album's musical touchstones, the song meanings prove harder to tease out. Jennings offers the half-explanation that "the lyrics are like a palette for the listener to paint their own story". Manson prefers to talk atmospheres rather than specifics, although he dwells longer on *Infinite Darkness*, the sinister opener to the record's more downbeat second half that

reminds us that 'you're dead longer than you're alive'. "When we did that song we'd both lost people," he explains. "So I guess it's about mortality. It's about the idea that death is something you can succeed at easily, but having the courage to be alive, and face shit, is more difficult. The second half of the record has a different bitterness."

As for the relatively upbeat title track, Manson says it's both an excavation of his own psyche and a call to damaged people everywhere, acknowledging that their pains are not so different. "It's about the mental state I was in, that people could relate to. Because everyone goes through their traumas." ▶

"Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails were two of the most influential bands in my life when I was young."

Shooter Jennings

song *I'm Not Like Everybody Else* by The Kinks, so I was trying to come up with something that had that vibe. And we just kept going."

The title track was sparked by a night of low-level criminality last October.

"Shooter and I attended a Brandi Carlile concert



**“For the past twenty years, all I’ve known
is to get on stage and sing. I can’t do that.
So it is mentally devastating.”**

Marilyn Manson



“I’ll probably somehow get blamed for causing the world to fall apart, I’m sure. I’m not looking for that credit.”

Marilyn Manson



Marilyn Manson in Paris, November 2017. He hopes "that some day in the near future I will get to play these [new] songs live".

Mental health is a huge issue now, isn't it?

"Oh, it always has been. I mean, my mother suffered from schizophrenia. I couldn't say exactly what version of my brain is 'good' or 'bad', but I know it's probably very taxing to be in a romantic relationship with me. I've tried to become a better person. I think everyone has the ability to change. It's about becoming the best version of yourself you can possibly be. Even if you're the best terrible piece of shit, there's something to be said for that.

"But hopefully I'm not a terrible piece of shit," he considers. "I'm just the best version of me. Which is flawed, not perfect, trying to do something that makes me happy, and brings happiness to other people. I feel like I've given something to the world, instead of taking something out."

Both men agree the key track on *We Are Chaos* is *Broken Needle*, which closes the record with the finality of a casket trundling into a furnace.

"We wanted the whole record to encapsulate these different styles," says Jennings. "You have moments that are acoustic, mechanical, rock'n'roll. And I think we did it all with that one song. Yet it still has this dark, sombre, aching quality. And I love that if you play *We Are Chaos* on your record player, once you get to the end of that song it will never stop playing unless you take the needle off."

So it was finished. But then along came covid. Lockdown, says Manson, has been swings and roundabouts. "It's hard to say if [the Christian right] is giving me a hard time right now, because I don't think churches are even open. Churches aren't open. Schools aren't open. So that rules out

a lot of trouble spots. A lot of troublemakers are out of a job. I'll probably somehow get blamed for causing the world to fall apart, I'm sure. I'm not looking for that credit."

Is life right now worse than usual, or is this just history repeating?

"Life has never been quite perfect, at any point. I can remember my childhood years, my early memories of growing up, and JFK was assassinated, and Vietnam. There's always been terrible things. On this record I was talking about how life has always been. It just happens to be worse now. But I try to focus on what I have, which is a great set of five cats, and the hope that some day in the near

is, apart from what's around you. And that can drive you insane."

What's strange is how perfectly the mood of the *We Are Chaos* album fits with these times – almost as though Manson looked ahead through those ghoulish contact lenses and saw the pandemic coming down the pipe.

"It's weird," says Jennings, "because these songs were written way before. But I think it's a good time for this record. It's not about UFOs, werewolves and demons. It's something deeply romantic that can touch people. It's what people need. I think Manson's lyrics offer a glimpse of light through the darkness."

The old Antichrist Superstar knows better than to step entirely into the light; even during a pandemic, mythology still matters. But it's that balance – the opposing sweet and sour of these songs – that makes *We Are Chaos* such a compelling soundtrack to the unfolding cataclysm of 2020.

"I'm saying that we're all fucked," Manson explains. "And this is what it is. But it's not necessarily the end. It's more like: 'But you can fix it, if you want to.' With all the darkness and emotion playing out through the album, there's a beam of hope at the end. Because otherwise, what's the point of making art?"

"I'm not a fatalist," he concludes. "I don't see this as being the end of everything. But I am posing the thought to myself – and to whoever's listening – that if this is the last day, let's make it worth something. Knowing that you may not be here tomorrow, you'd better make today fucking great."

"I'm trying to do something that makes me happy, and brings happiness to other people."

Marilyn Manson

future I will get to play these songs live."

And that's the real kicker of confinement, he says. Manson doesn't go out much anyway, but the enforced absence from the stage is like being denied oxygen. "Being unable to perform live..." he tails off. "It's not a complaint, like some moody, arrogant rock star saying I can't do my job so woe is me. But for the past twenty years, all I've known is to get on stage and sing. I can't do that. So it is mentally devastating. When you're in quarantine your life becomes a macrocosm or a microcosm. You get confused. You don't know what the reality

We Are Chaos is out now via Loma Vista.